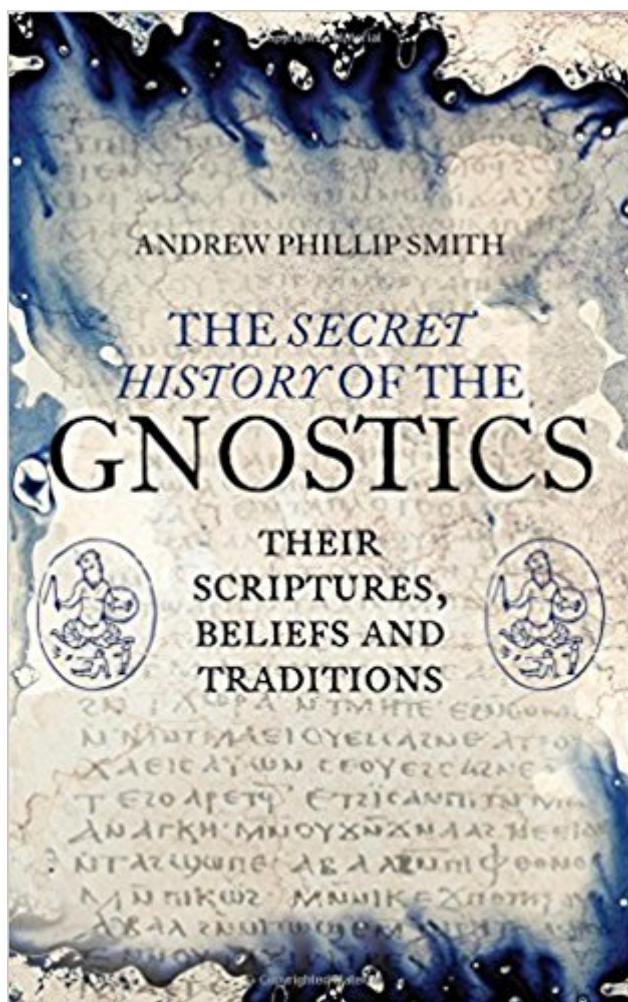


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# The Secret History Of The Gnostics: Their Scriptures, Beliefs And Traditions



## Synopsis

The Secret History of the Gnostics offers long-awaited illumination on the mystical movement that teaches 'gnosis' - knowledge of God as opposed to unquestioning faith. Acclaimed author Andrew Phillip Smith delves into the myths and practices of this ancient movement, exploring its popularity during 2nd century AD, its subsequent decline under the weight of orthodoxy in the Church, and its present-day resurgence. Gnosticism has travelled a fascinating path - from the Manichaeans in Modern Persia between the 3rd and 7th centuries AD, to the triumphs and tragedies of the Cathars in Southern Europe between the 12th and 14th centuries, to, finally, today's Mandaeans in Iraq. However, as the author points out, the revival of Gnosticism extends further than these narrow sects, offering inspiration to a legion of literary figures, including Dan Brown and Philip Pullman. Gnosticism's emphasis on personal over organized religion, in keeping with the doctrine of the early Christian era during which it thrived, has found particular resonance with today's multicultural world. The Secret History of the Gnostics is not simply an authoritative account of one sect's practical beliefs and customs - it is, in effect, a manifesto, an appeal to those inspired by or drawn to the Gnostic faith not to forget its origins.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Andrew Phillip Smith is editor of *The Gnostic* and the author of several books on Gnosticism, esotericism and early Christianity, including the first ever Dictionary of Gnosticism. He has also written for *New Dawn*, *Fortean Times* and *The Guardian*. Originally from Wales he now lives in

Dublin and has also lived in London and California.

Here is a history of Gnosticism [see comment 1] that is scholarly without being academic, objective without being impersonal. It contains no primary research but surveys discerningly what has become in recent decades a substantial literature. Mr. Smith's writing style is lucid, intelligent, and engaging -- and well honed for his purposes. I enjoy and often admire his thoughtful turns of phrase. Don't be surprised if, when you finish this book, you look forward to reading other works by its author. I also admire what Mr. Smith has chosen not to write -- namely, a manual mixed in with the history. For many it would be a temptation. But the energies and processes engaged by a manual are utterly different from (and perhaps incommensurate with) the intellectual distancing required for writing good history. Mr. Smith clearly understands this and wisely forebears. He just as clearly understands that there's far more to Gnosticism than history. He indicates this in comments throughout the text, but it becomes especially important in chapter 5, on Gnostic practices, where the book diverges furthest from what one would likely find in a strictly academic account [comment 2]; in chapter 11, which treats modern revivals of Gnosticism; and in References, which documents the scope and catholicity of his research. The first half of *Secret History* tells us much of what is known about Gnosticism before ca. AD 325 (the year in which Christianity became, in essence, a Roman state religion, with all that entails). The second half describes a range of Gnostic and Gnostic-like groups and practices that have left traces over 1700 ensuing years. Two of those groups, the Cathars and the Mandaeans, have received separate book-length treatments by Mr. Smith, and he clearly is expert in his summary of their histories. The chapter-length treatment of the Manichaeans is likewise quite satisfying. Coverage of certain other topics is more cursory, either because we lack sufficient source materials (e.g., the Paulicians) or because the subjects themselves are vast and beyond the main thread of the book (e.g., cross influences between Neoplatonist and Gnostic texts, Gnosticism in Sufi writings and practice, Gnosticism's relationship to Kabbalah, Gnostic influences in Fourth Way teachings). Throughout Mr. Smith keeps his eye on his goal, which is to produce a balanced historical introduction to Gnosticism that can guide readers to other resources, both textual and practical, should they wish to learn more. In this, *Secret History* succeeds admirably, thanks to the author's insight into his subject and his sense of proportion. One comes away with the sense that the impressive scholarship in this text is but the visible tip of larger resources that shape the author's general approach. I strongly recommend *Secret History* to anyone curious about Gnosticism or the early history of Christianity.

A great read for added information of the history of religion.

An eloquent narrative to a complex and long evolving ideology.

Gnostic history is such a wild swamp it is a joy to jump in to the swamp buggy of such a philosophical polymath as Smith for his guided tour through the mythological jungles of Sethianism with their own esoteric identity and the later Valentinians who made a valiant effort to ingratiate themselves with Roman Christianity to the point of nearly capturing the papacy. The author is so well versed in the history of heresy, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism for the general context he does a good job explaining why Gnosticism should make more sense to the contemporary person such as in “the problem of evil” if God is good” while at the same time narrowing down Gnosticism to the practical essence. We were all divine souls who “fell” into matter controlled by an ignorant-evil demiurge—who turns out to be the Hebrew God and his minions or “archons”—and were given savior figures to help purify our souls so we can unite them with the Spirit spark of the divine and return home to the “Pleroma”. The author seems a Jungian in viewing gnostic mythology more as an interior phenomenon, however, rather than seeing it as cosmological phenomenon even to the extent of this delicious and frightening quote he drudged up: “The soul is the food of the archons, without which it cannot live because it derives from the dew above and gives them strength.”! This quote seemed to be talking about real beings who feed off of our energy as vampires and seems more of a stretch to psychologize it. The real excitement in the book for me was that Smith got kissing cousins close to identifying the sacrament known as the Bridal Chamber which has mystified scholars for decades. He conceives of it as the merging of the soul with the spark of the Spirit. Fair enough. But what does THAT mean? There is a clue at the end of the Gospel of the Egyptians regarding the chanting of vowel sounds and Smith makes the most of that in suggesting one becomes an objective observer of the self who is chanting. Later, he discusses the Manichaean belief of the stars of the Milky Way being light souls moving to the Moon to the Sun. This is another visionary process where one could lose oneself in the countless stars that it would still the mind and allow the spiritual light” suggested by the imagined light of the sun” to infuse one as in the chanting. A similar earliest Hebrew mysticism was “Throne mysticism” where one would meditate on the Big Dipper and imagine it as the “throne” of God. The Bogomils-Cathars formalized veneration of the “Perfects” may have functioned in this way too in trying to visualize the divine angel in the “Perfects” which would tend to quiet the mind

regarding the outer form and inducing a *split* of perception. This is also what I think the Bridal Chamber in effect was but the actual meditation was well known as the psychomantium in the mysteries centers of Greece and Egypt. It is scrying where one looks into dyed water or a darkened mirror with a candle behind. Eventually the eyes tire and subconscious images become visible and guided meditation could take place. The *Dialogue of the Savior* says many times: *Unless you stand in the darkness you won't see the light.* Saying 89 in the Gospel of Thomas reads: *Why do you wash the outside of the cup? Do you not realize that He who made the inside is the same One who made the outside?* Saying 89 is preceded by a saying of *prophets and angels will come to you* and followed by a saying concerning *rest* or *repose*. Yet, the Bridal Chamber is also an interior experience of ecstasy in Sophia's "The Holy Spirit (the Spirit of the phenomenal world) absent the sacramental form as Saying 104 makes clear. The great Bridal Chamber sacrament sermon, however, is *The Gospel of Philip* where we find the phrase *the mirrored Bridal Chamber* and *Nor again can you see in light without water and mirror.* The Redemption sacrament, then, would be using the Bridal Chamber in guided meditation to reach the dew drop of the Spirit that is outside of time space. As *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* says: *elt was my going to the revealed height which the world did not accept, my third baptism is a revealed image.* (The other two bodies, heavens, or baptisms being the earthly one and dream-astral-body.) In my book, *The Samaritan Jesus* (), I make the argument that Jesus was a mystery school teacher but I also highly recommend Smith's book where you will learn more by accident than other places by intent.

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